



ISSN Print: 2664-8717
ISSN Online: 2664-8725
Impact Factor: RJIF 8.00
IJRE 2024; 6(2): 397-399
www.englishjournal.net
Received: 21-10-2024
Accepted: 22-11-2024

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Stories often forgotten: The women of *Pather Panchali*

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33545/26648717.2024.v6.i2f.260>

Abstract

As a seminal work of Indian cinema, *Pather Panchali* is celebrated for its neorealist portrayal of rural Bengal and its humanistic exploration of poverty and survival. However, despite the film's critical acclaim as the starting point of the *Apu Trilogy*, the stories of its women have often been marginalized or forgotten. This study examines how the cultural phenomenon of the "panchali" is integral to the Bengali female subculture and how the film's narrative and cinematographic techniques highlight the resilience and agency of its female characters. Through a close analysis of key scenes, camera angles and shot lengths, this paper argues that the survival skills and emotional labour of Sarbajaya, Durga, and Indir Thakrun are crucial to the film's depiction of rural life. By combining literary and film studies methodologies, the paper seeks to reframe *Pather Panchali* as not only Apu's story but also a narrative of the women whose lives shape the contours of the film's world.

Keywords: Neorealism, Bengali female subculture, cinematographic techniques, emotional labour women in Indian cinema

Introduction

Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* (1955) is a landmark film in the history of world cinema, renowned for its poignant portrayal of poverty in rural Bengal and its innovative use of neorealist techniques. As the first film in what would become the *Apu Trilogy*—followed by *Aparajito* (1956) and *Apur Sansar* (1959)—*Pather Panchali* introduced audiences to the life of Apu, a young boy growing up in a small village. However, while the film is often remembered for its depiction of Apu's childhood and his family's struggles, the stories of its female characters like—Sarbajaya, Durga, and Indir Thakrun—are equally significant yet frequently overlooked.

Adapted from the novel of the same name by Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay, *Pather Panchali* brings to life the vivid world of rural Bengal, with Ray's direction capturing the subtleties of everyday existence. The film stars Karuna Banerjee as Sarbajaya, Chunibala Devi as Indir Thakrun, and Uma Dasgupta as Durga, each delivering powerful performances that deepen the film's emotional resonance. Cinematographer Subrata Mitra's groundbreaking use of natural lighting and thought-provoking camera techniques enhances the film's realism, while Ravi Shankar's evocative score adds a layer of poignancy, reinforcing the film's themes of resilience and loss. Together, the novel's adaptation and the collaboration of these artists result in a film that is both a visual and emotional masterpiece, bringing to light the often-silenced stories of women in rural India.

Critics say, "Ray never reduced his female characters to an 'extra' in his films. More often than not, they come across as real human beings, burdened with their share of struggles, and emboldened by their desire to survive." Ray, who drew inspiration from Italian neorealism and directors like Vittorio De Sica, approached *Pather Panchali* with an eye for authenticity and a commitment to capturing the everyday realities of rural life. The film's setting in the early 20th-century Bengal village of Nischindipur reflects the socio-economic challenges faced by many at the time, including poverty, displacement, and the impact of modernity on traditional ways of life. Within this context, the film's female characters play a crucial role in shaping the narrative and providing a lens through which to understand the socio-cultural fabric of the community. Sarbajaya, the mother, represents the enduring strength and resilience required to maintain a household under dire circumstances; Durga, her daughter, symbolizes the youthful exuberance and desire for freedom that is often curtailed by poverty;

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and Indir Thakrun, the elderly aunt, embodies the marginalized figure whose wisdom and experience are undervalued in a patriarchal society. This paper aims to foreground the stories of these women by examining how Ray uses cinematic techniques—such as shot lengths, camera angles, and editing styles—to highlight their experiences and agency. Furthermore, the discussion will explore how the cultural phenomenon of the "panchali" is integral to Bengali female subculture, providing a narrative framework that connects the lives of these characters to a broader tradition of storytelling that centres on female voices and experiences.

Panchali as a Cultural Phenomenon and Its Connection to Bengali Female Subculture

The term "panchali" refers to a traditional form of Bengali folk narrative that often centres on mythological or historical stories, frequently recited or sung by women. This form of storytelling has long been integral to Bengali female subculture, serving as a means of both entertainment and

social commentary within the confines of domestic spaces. In *Pather Panchali*, Ray subtly invokes this tradition through the film's narrative structure and the lives of its female characters, who are often seen sharing stories, gossiping, and reflecting on their hardships. The storytelling aspect in the film, much like the panchali itself, becomes a vehicle for expressing the unspoken emotions, desires, and frustrations of the women, highlighting their resilience and strength in the face of adversity.

Ray's decision to frame certain scenes with a focus on dialogue and interpersonal interactions, rather than action, mirrors the oral tradition of the panchali. For instance, scenes where Sarbajaya interacts with her neighbours or reprimands Durga for her playful yet reckless behaviour are shot with medium or close-up shots, emphasizing the emotional intensity and relational dynamics. These scenes, rich with verbal exchange, echo the communal aspect of panchali storytelling, where the shared experience of narrative serves to



Fig 1: Durga Getting Reprimanded by Sarbajaya and Subsequent Reactions in Mid Close-Up or Close-Up Shots (*Pather Panchali* 45:00-45:55)

The Marginalization of Female Narratives in the *Apu Trilogy*

While *Pather Panchali* is often celebrated as the first instalment of the *Apu Trilogy*, this framing inherently marginalizes the narratives of female characters like Durga. Although Durga plays a significant role in *Pather Panchali*, her unfortunate death towards the end of the film leads to her being almost forgotten in the subsequent films. This narrative choice reflects a broader trend in storytelling that often prioritizes male experiences and viewpoints, reducing female characters to secondary roles. The invisibility of Durga in the trilogy's title and progression underscores how female contributions and sacrifices are frequently overlooked or minimized in favour of male-centric narratives.

However, Durga's character is pivotal to the emotional core of *Pather Panchali*. Her youthful teenage energy and desire for freedom, as seen in the scenes where she plays near the water when the rain arrives or follows the candy-man with her younger brother, are depicted with extreme long shots and tracking shots that capture her movement and spirit. These cinematic techniques contrast sharply with the more static and confined shots of Sarbajaya, highlighting the generational and gendered constraints imposed on women in their society. Durga's actions, while seemingly rebellious, are actually expressions of her innate desire to connect with the world beyond her immediate circumstances, a desire that is tragically cut short by her untimely death.



Fig 2: Durga Playing in the Rain Depicted in an Extreme Long Shots (*Pather Panchali* 1:36:07)

Neorealism and the Portrayal of Rural Poverty: The Pivotal Roles of Sarbajaya, Durga, and Indir Thakrun

Pather Panchali is often praised for its neorealist depiction of rural poverty, a style characterized by the use of non-professional actors, on-location shooting, natural lighting, and an emphasis on everyday life. This aesthetic choice serves to ground the narrative in the harsh realities of its setting, where survival is a daily struggle, and moments of joy are fleeting. Within this context, the film's female characters are portrayed as vital to the family's survival, each contributing in different ways to the household's resilience.

Sarbajaya, the mother, is the embodiment of strength and endurance. Her stern demeanour and often harsh treatment of Durga are indicative of the immense pressure she faces as the primary caretaker in a poverty-stricken household. In scenes where Sarbajaya is shown doing household chores or negotiating with local merchants, Ray employs long takes and close-ups that focus on her weary expression and stoic resolve. These choices highlight her internal struggle and the weight of responsibility she carries, underscoring her pivotal role in the family's survival. Her character is central to the film's exploration of gendered labour and the sacrifices women make to sustain their families under challenging conditions.

Durga, though a child, is portrayed as a symbol of youthful defiance and innocence. Her relationship with Apu is one of the film's most tender elements, reflecting both the joys and sorrows of childhood. Despite her playful nature, Durga is also deeply affected by the family's poverty. In a scene where she and Apu enjoy a picnic together along with their friends, Ray uses a top angle long shot as a bird's eye perspective to juxtapose their little happy moments of freedom contrasting them sharply with their own underprivileged limitations. Durga's subsequent illness and death serve as a stark reminder of the fragility of life in such conditions, and her loss is a turning point that deeply impacts the family dynamic.



Fig 3: The Picnic Scene (*Pather Panchali* 56:45)

Indir Thakrun, the elderly aunt, represents the marginalized figures within rural society whose wisdom and experience are often overlooked. Despite her advanced age and frailty, Indir is shown as a resourceful and resilient character, navigating her marginalized status with dignity and humour. In scenes where she is ostracized or ridiculed by the village children, Ray's use of handheld camera work creates a sense of instability and vulnerability, reflecting her precarious position in the household and community. However, Indir's

presence and her eventual death also underscore the theme of loss and the impermanence of life, reinforcing the narrative's focus on survival and resilience. In fact, Ray's portrayal of her death comes with layers of significance as Ray himself writes, "I also made auntie live much longer in my treatment because I knew that her sudden exit would disappoint the audience. In the original she dies shortly after Apu is born, but in my treatment she dies when Durga is about ten or eleven years old. This needed a genuine scene when Apu and Durga discover her dead body in a bamboo grove—the children's first encounter with death" (Ray 31)

Conclusion

Pather Panchali is often remembered as the beginning of the *Apu Trilogy*, focusing on the life and growth of a young boy in rural Bengal. However, this narrative framing overlooks the significant contributions of the film's female characters—Sarbajaya, Durga, and Indir Thakrun—whose stories are integral to the film's exploration of poverty, resilience, and the human spirit. By analyzing the film through the lens of gender, it becomes clear that these women are not mere background figures but central to the narrative's emotional depth and realism. Their roles as caretakers, nurturers, and survivors are crucial in shaping the film's portrayal of rural life and its challenges.

Satyajit Ray's use of neorealist techniques, combined with his sensitivity to the nuances of gender and social dynamics, allows for a rich and layered portrayal of these characters. The film's cinematography, editing, and narrative structure work together to highlight their agency and resilience, even as they navigate a world that often marginalizes their experiences. By bringing these forgotten stories to the forefront, this paper seeks to reframe *Pather Panchali* as not just Apu's story but also a tribute to the enduring strength and spirit of the women who shape his world.

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